Subject Inspection of Spanish
REPORT

Saint Michael’s College
Ballsbridge,
Dublin 4
Roll number: 60561G

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REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SPANISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Michael’s College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Spanish and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers and examined students’ work. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the deputy principal. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Support for languages in St Michael’s College is very strong, with a choice of three modern European languages provided for students at both junior and senior cycles. It is very positive that while the study of a language is optional, all students continue their study of a European language to Leaving Certificate level. Uptake for Spanish is very healthy and the Spanish department is well established, with five fully qualified members of staff making up the Spanish team. At present there are three class groups for Spanish in all of the junior cycle years, two groups in Transition Year (TY) and three class groups in each of fifth year and sixth year. Students choose their options prior to entry into first year and it is very positive that students can opt to take two languages in junior cycle if they so wish. The suggestion contained in a whole-school evaluation, carried out in April 2008, that first-year students be given a short taster programme of optional subjects to help them make more informed choices would be of benefit in relation to the study of languages. It is, however, reported that the school facilitates, within reason, those students who wish to change their subject options in first term. An open-choice system operates at both junior and senior cycle and this is good practice.

Classes are of mixed ability in junior cycle and this year, for the first time, the school has introduced streaming into senior cycle Spanish. It is recommended that this latter arrangement be kept under review, by both management and all of the Spanish team, in order to ensure that the class groupings in senior cycle encourage all students to remain motivated and to achieve to their full potential. To facilitate the streaming of senior cycle students in the languages subjects the school has timetabled languages in a block, so that, in effect, students can only opt for one language in senior cycle. It is recommended that this also be reviewed so that those students who wish to continue their study of two languages can be facilitated. Given the importance of language learning within the school, it is suggested that it would be of benefit, over time, to develop an overall languages policy for the school.
Time allocation for languages in the timetable is good. It is reported that teaching resources are provided by means of an annual budget and this appears to be working well. Most teachers have their own base classroom and all teachers have ready access to tape recorders/CD players, video/DVD players, overhead projectors and a data projector. The school has been proactive over the last few years in expanding the facilities for information and communication technology (ICT). Teachers have good access to ICT and relevant professional development is provided for them. Broadband is available in the classrooms and laptops are provided for those teachers who wish to use them in the classroom. All of the TY students have laptops and the recently introduced computer network system in the school facilitates access to school information and teaching materials for teachers, students and parents. This will create the opportunity for Spanish students to have access to lesson plans, texts, aural material, marking schemes and examination material, thereby encouraging independent learning.

The school has been engaged in collaborative school development planning and subject planning has been facilitated and encouraged. It is suggested that the next stage in the whole-school planning process could be an ongoing focus on teaching and learning in the classroom, perhaps with a task group investigating recent research into teaching methodologies such as assessment for learning, which could then form the basis for a whole-staff approach.

It is reported that the learning-support team co-ordinates a comprehensive programme for students requiring learning support, and that individual education plans are in place for those students who need them. Subject teachers liaise with the learning-support team and whole-staff in-service has been provided in relation to special educational needs in the recent past.

The Spanish teachers have been very involved in their professional teachers’ association, the Association of Teachers of Spanish (ATS), and some have held important roles over the years in the provision of nation-wide in-service days and teaching resources for Spanish teachers. Students of Spanish have been encouraged to take part in Spanish quizzes over the years and teachers organise outings from time to time to see Spanish films. While no particular links with a Spanish school are in place, students are encouraged to take part in exchanges and visits to Spain. It may be of benefit to investigate developing contacts with a partner school in Spain, with a view to creating links, many of which could be computer-mediated. The national agency Léargas, at www.léargas.ie, could be of assistance in this area.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

A detailed subject plan for Spanish has been prepared and regular meetings of the subject department team have been facilitated. A co-ordinator has been appointed and the decision to rotate this role is welcomed. The subject plan includes the aims and objectives for Spanish; the curriculum content for each year group; details of textbooks, course materials, time allocation, options structures and timetabling; homework, record-keeping and assessment procedures; a list of effective teaching methodologies and a range of resources. Much credit is due for the progress achieved to date, and the following suggestions are made to further advance the subject planning process.

Over time, the subject plan should expand the curriculum content for each year group, basing the content on the relevant syllabus. Using the integrated approach evident in the lessons observed, where both receptive and productive language skills are taught in an integrated manner around a
theme or topic, the plan could highlight the specific learning outcomes that students should achieve. It would be of benefit to include a list of the available resources relating to each topic or theme (which could be updated regularly) and the teaching methodologies and strategies used to encourage collaborative learning and active learning tasks. The resources and materials for the different topics, such as differentiated worksheets, visual aids, games, supplementary listening and reading material and cue cards or other props to facilitate pair work and group work, could then be stored and shared by all Spanish teachers. The storage of some of these resources electronically, where feasible, could facilitate input from all members of the department. As good teamwork is already in evidence within the Spanish department, the sharing of the good practices observed during the evaluation, and ongoing discussion of successful teaching strategies, will further enhance the teaching and learning of the subject.

Planning documentation for Spanish includes teaching strategies for students with additional educational needs where the importance of using differentiated materials and visual and concrete stimuli is acknowledged. The ongoing development of such teaching resources is greatly encouraged.

It is evident that the work undertaken with TY students of Spanish is in line with the ethos of the year. As part of the TY programme, students have the opportunity to study Spanish films and are directed towards useful Spanish websites. Each student produces a folder of work completed during the year and this is included in their end-of-year assessment. It is suggested that individual TY students could be required to carry out some project work (preferably in the target language) during the year, which they would then present to their peers. While, in general, the Spanish teachers work well together as a team and share their pool of teaching resources, the teachers involved in teaching the TY groups seem to work mostly independently of each other and have built up their own bank of resources for the year. It is therefore recommended that, as part of the subject planning process, all members of the team work collaboratively in the further development of the plan for TY, and that a communal bank of TY resources be established so that teachers can share their expertise and ideas. In general, a wide range of resources for the language has been built up over the years and includes textbooks, listening material, visual aids, worksheets, authentic Spanish news articles, dictionaries, games and details of on-line resources.

Individual planning and preparation for lessons was very good. Planning for lesson content was appropriate to the level and age of the students and formed part of a coherent overall plan for learning. It is suggested that when planning for lesson content, teachers should look at ways to increase individual students’ participation through active learning strategies.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Good teaching and learning was in evidence throughout the evaluation, with some very good examples of consistent use of the target language, the use of ICT and a broad variety of activities. There is a high level of expertise among the team of Spanish teachers and it was evident that students were used to hearing and using the target language. In some lessons there was a tendency to translate classroom instructions into English and it is suggested that this may often be unnecessary and should be avoided. In some lessons students were accustomed to using the target language for most classroom interactions and it is recommended that this should be encouraged in all lessons. The meaning of new items of vocabulary was often explained through the use of synonyms or visual aids rather than direct translation and in one instance, the use of the target
language to explain grammatical items was particularly notable, with students showing good understanding. These good practices are also encouraged for more widespread use.

Students responded very well to active learning tasks, such as hot-seating and pair work, and in some lessons, individual students were asked to write answers on the whiteboard or to read aloud in the target language. It is recommended that Spanish teachers investigate the further development of strategies to encourage active student participation and share these ideas among the team. It is also suggested that any resources used to facilitate such activities should be kept communally, so that all teachers can have access to them, and that they should be listed in the subject plan alongside the relevant theme or topic.

In the main, lessons were very well paced, instructions were clear and students knew what was expected of them. Lessons were sufficiently challenging, with a variety of activities to reinforce learning and to ensure students’ full engagement throughout. Continuity with previous learning was evident in all lessons. The smooth transition from one activity to another provided integration of the different language skills around the relevant themes. Pair work was well managed, so that tasks were time-limited and students were clear about what was expected of them. In the one instance where students involved in pair work appeared unsure about what they were supposed to be doing, suggestions were made that the learning outcomes should be clarified for students at the outset of the lesson and that very clear instructions be given to students. It was also suggested that, when planning for lessons, the focus should be on student activity rather than on teacher input, with a variety of activities to ensure that the pace of the lesson is sufficiently challenging.

Appropriate emphasis was placed on verbs and grammar, with good attention to detail. Grammatical explanation and revision were integrated smoothly into the theme or topic of the lessons. Aural tasks were well organised, and in some instances, students were provided with the tape-script to further reinforce learning and understanding. It is suggested that listening-comprehension extracts could be used, not only to provide examination practice, but to create more opportunities for questioning and classroom interaction in the target language. While overall, attention to correct pronunciation was appropriately and sensitively dealt with, it was suggested in one lesson that certain sounds could be highlighted for particular practice.

One-to-one questioning was effectively used in all lessons to introduce and practise linguistic items and to assess students’ understanding. Discussion often evolved around students’ own experiences, making the learning relevant to their lives. In one particular instance, higher-order questions were used very successfully to challenge the students who were then able to express their own opinions and give in-depth answers in relation to the topic being studied. Sufficient ‘wait time’ gave students the opportunity to process their thoughts and to construct their answers. This is very good practice.

A variety of resources was used during the lessons including ICT, a film extract, visual aids, teacher-generated worksheets, textbooks and listening extracts. In one lesson a film extract from *El Labarinto del Fauno* was very effectively used, in conjunction with a worksheet, to introduce students to the characters in the film. In a junior cycle lesson, it was suggested that, rather than placing too much emphasis on the textbook, alternative teaching resources should be utilised more often and should include more visual stimuli such as flashcards or photographs.

Good use has been made of the teacher-based classrooms to provide a rich environment for the language, with Spanish posters, maps, visual aids, word charts and some examples of students’ work displayed on the walls of the classroom. This is very much encouraged, both as an aid to learning and to provide visual stimuli for oral practice. Classroom management was good and it
was evident that teachers have high expectations of their students. Very good student-teacher rapport was in evidence and students’ efforts were regularly affirmed. Students responded well to questioning and were fully engaged throughout. It was evident that the teachers’ enthusiasm for the language is shared by the students, who are well able to converse in Spanish and demonstrate good skills and knowledge.

**ASSESSMENT**

Comprehensive assessment and reporting procedures are in place in St Michael’s, with twice-yearly formal house examinations and reports to parents. Management and teachers analyse student outcomes with reference to national norms and this informs planning.

Ongoing informal assessment of students’ progress in Spanish takes place through class tests, vocabulary tests, class interactions and homework tasks. Teachers keep a written record of students’ progress and attendance. Some teachers carry out oral testing for all year groups and this is good practice and greatly encouraged for all class groups from first year to sixth year. Students should be aware that their oral skills will be assessed at all stages throughout their school career, whether through an overall mark for class participation or through an oral test at the end of the year.

Homework is assigned and monitored, with copybooks being taken up regularly. It would be important to ensure that students maintain a corrected version of productive writing exercises in their copies for revision purposes. The good practice of including constructive comments in students’ copies is encouraged.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Support for languages in St Michael’s College is very strong, with a choice of three modern European languages, and all students continue their study of a European language to Leaving Certificate level.
- Students can opt to take two languages in junior cycle if they so wish.
- Provision of resources, including ICT, is very good.
- The Spanish teachers have been very involved in their professional teachers’ association.
- A detailed subject plan for Spanish has been prepared and regular meetings of the subject department team have been facilitated.
- Individual planning and preparation for lessons was very good.
- Good teaching and learning was in evidence throughout the evaluation, with some very good examples of consistent use of the target language, the use of ICT and a broad variety of activities.
- Students responded very well to active learning tasks.
- Lessons were sufficiently challenging, with a variety of activities to reinforce learning and to ensure students’ full engagement throughout.
- Classroom management was good and it was evident that teachers have high expectations of their students.
• Students demonstrate a good level of skills and understanding.
• Comprehensive assessment, recording and reporting procedures are in place.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

• It is recommended that the recent class-groupings arrangement in senior cycle be kept under review.
• It is recommended that the blocking of the timetable for languages at senior cycle be reviewed.
• It is recommended that all members of the Spanish team work collaboratively in the further development of the plan for Transition Year.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the deputy principal, at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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